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Triennial review of the implementation of the recommendations made by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its thirty-seventh session on the evaluation of the statistics programme

Note by the Secretary-General

In conformity with paragraph 5 (e) (I) of General Assembly resolution 48/218 B of 29 July 1994, and with paragraph 7 of General Assembly resolution 54/244 of 23 December 1999, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the triennial review of the implementation of the recommendations made by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its thirty-seventh session on the evaluation of the statistics programme (E/AC.51/1997/2). The report has been reviewed by the relevant departments and offices. The Secretary-General takes note of its findings and concurs with its conclusions.

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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the triennial review of the implementation of the recommendations made by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its thirty-seventh session on the evaluation of the statistics programme

Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with the decision taken by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its twenty-second session to review the implementation of its recommendations three years after taking decisions on an in-depth evaluation of the statistics programme.

Efforts to implement the recommendations of the in-depth evaluation are reviewed in terms of four topics: the transition from a focus on publications to a focus on customized services; publications; coordination of the programme and services; and utilization of staff resources. The review concludes that the United Nations Statistics Division has made a concerted effort to implement the recommendations of the in-depth evaluation as endorsed by the Committee for Programme and Coordination.

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I. Introduction

1. In 1994, the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) scheduled an in-depth evaluation of the United Nations statistics programme for 1997.[1] One of the considerations listed in the note by the Secretariat on topics for future in-depth evaluations (see E/AC.51/1993/6, para. 8) was the need to examine a programme generally considered successful in order to learn lessons applicable to related programmes. The statistics programme was selected for evaluation with that criterion in mind.

2. The in-depth evaluation made 10 recommendations in three broad areas:

(a) Transition from focus on publications to focus on customized services;

(b) Publications;

(c) Coordination of programme and services.

At its thirty-seventh session, CPC considered the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on the in-depth evaluation of the statistics programme, commended the report for its thorough review of the programme, and endorsed the recommendations in the report on the understanding that the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division would propose an implementation plan and timetable at the 1998 meeting of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination of the Statistical Commission. The Committee's endorsement was made on the understanding that the United Nations would continue to issue a number of publications as a matter of record and for other non-commercial reasons.[2]

II. Transition from focus on publications to focus on customized services

A. Development of UNESIS

Recommendation 1
User needs and the development of UNESIS

The Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis should seek the views of representatives of the main user groups on their needs and utilize that information in the design of UNESIS.

3. A progress report on the United Nations Economic and Social Information System (UNESIS) database (E/CN.3/1999/27) was submitted to the Statistical Commission for review at its thirtieth session. It provided a description of the databases and support services included in the system, as well as a description of the standards and guidelines utilized, and of collaboration with the regional commissions. The development of UNESIS is being carried out in cooperation with other parts of the global statistical system, which are both data providers and users. A consultation with data providers took place in the last quarter of 1999.

B. On-line access

Recommendation 2
On-line access to United Nations statistical databases

(a) It should be the general policy of the United Nations that statistical data and associated analysis is to be made available free of charge on-line, with exceptions only to protect significant commercial value or confidentiality.

(b) The Statistics Division and the Department of Public Information should explore the feasibility of establishing on-line access to UNESIS databases at regional statistical institutes and United Nations information centres.

4. The United Nations Statistics Division follows dissemination policies set by the United Nations Publications Board. The Division consults with the Sales and Marketing Section of the Department of Public Information to determine which data sets represent "significant commercial value"; data sets comprising significant commercial value are the International Commodity Trade Databases and the databases of the *Demographic Yearbook*, the *Statistical Yearbook*, the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics* and the System of National Accounts. Of less but still significant commercial value are databases of energy statistics, industrial commodity production, the *World Statistics Pocketbook*, and the Women's Indicators Database on CD-ROM. Of limited commercial value are energy balances statistics and the methodological publications, with some widely used exceptions, such as population census recommendations. The only confidential data set in the Division is the national

accounts estimates prepared for the Committee on Contributions.

5. The Statistics Division makes data sets on the Internet, including its protected data sets, available on request at no charge to United Nations information centres and regional statistical institutes. The UNESIS system will allow the same access as soon as an Internet version is available. The Division will continue to expand the availability of information on the Internet, allowing it to decrease the preparation and dissemination of limited circulation print materials. Material which is more economically distributed on the Internet has been identified and included in plans for the implementation of UNESIS as a principal data dissemination vehicle of the Division. A working version of UNESIS is being tested on the Intranet. The full Internet implementation of UNESIS for outside use will be available in the second quarter of 2000. Planning has been undertaken with the optical disk system to make methodological publications available on the Internet in 2000.

C. User needs

Recommendation 3
Tracking and responding to needs of users

The statistics divisions in the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis and the regional commissions should actively seek to determine existing and potential demand for their services through such means as focus groups of users; analysis of utilization patterns of on-line users; surveys of national statistical offices; and surveys of organizations requesting customized services.

6. The United Nations Statistics Division works closely with users requesting specialized services and customized data paid through the revenue account. All users are consulted by phone, letter, facsimile or e-mail to meet requests to their satisfaction.

7. The Division has prepared a general questionnaire for a review by national statistical offices, regional offices and selected other users of data of their requirements for the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics* (print and on-line). The questionnaire on the *Bulletin* was distributed in March 1999; addressees were requested to indicate the priority that the Division should give in the future to the compilation and dissemination of 21 key indicators. A total of 58 responses had been received by the end of January 2000, and analysis of these responses is still in progress to date.

8. The Division cooperates with the Sales and Marketing Section of the Department of Public Information in conducting user surveys and focus groups on selected publications in statistics, as described below. These surveys do not cover official free distribution; a questionnaire to those who receive Division publications at no cost will be distributed in the first quarter of 2000. In the future, the Division plans to participate, as resources permit, in several user forums per year to discuss user needs.

9. The Sales and Marketing Section of the Department of Public Information has undertaken two user evaluation studies, a limited telephone survey of one-time buyers of the *Demographic Yearbook*, and a focus group of university research libraries on United Nations publications generally, and is preparing one on the *World Statistics Pocketbook*.

10. The first user survey was based on telephone interviews with customers in the United States who purchased volume 47 of the *Demographic Yearbook*, but did not purchase volumes 48-49. The purpose of the study was to find out why customers had not purchased the latest editions of the *Yearbook*, and what would it take for them to purchase it again. It was found that most customers who did not purchase the latest edition fall into the category of "one-time buyers" who purchase the publication when there is a specific need for the information. Examples of such one-time buyers include bookstores which order on the request of customers and commercial and non-profit entities who use the information for a specific project.

11. For the second user survey, the Sales and Marketing Section hired a consulting firm to organize a focus group of key users to assess the value and usefulness of United Nations publications, including statistical publications, and the marketing activities used to promote them. The focus group was held during the American Library Association's annual meeting in June 1998. The survey provided insights into such issues as factors affecting serial and book selection and the purchase of electronic products. Librarians regard the United Nations publications web site as outstanding.

12. In addition to the activity described above, the Statistical Services Branch is currently organizing a user review and focus group on the following products which had been produced or were in preparation:

(a) *Statistical Yearbook* CD-ROM;

(b) Second generation of the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics* on-line for the Internet;

(c) United Nations database for the Internet.

13. In the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), user needs are considered from two perspectives, first the regional client focus and secondly needs at the country level. Concerning regional client focus, the statistics component of the Development Information Services Division has, in the course of the last 12 months, been engaged in an activity on rethinking statistics in ECA as part of the reform measures currently in progress in ECA. This has entailed a review of the needs of user divisions in ECA with a view to strengthening the implementation of the different components of the regional programme. Second, requests of member States at regional and national workshops both in the participant workshop evaluations and in the collective recommendations as adopted by the meetings have been a valuable source of information for refocusing the ECA response to user needs. With respect to user needs at the country level, ECA has prepared and disseminated guidelines for needs assessment and strategy development that have been used by member States to conduct their needs assessments. In addition, a task force to evaluate the implementation of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s has commenced operations. A team of six consultants will visit selected African countries and hold consultations with both producers and users of data and determine the extent to which national statistical programmes are established on the basis of national user needs assessments as recommended in the Plan of Action. The results of the evaluation will be used in formulating a strategy for statistical development in Africa in the year 2000 and beyond. The evaluation is a collaborative exercise being implemented jointly by ECA, member States and development partners within the framework of the Coordinating Committee on African Statistical Development. In addition, in 1998 and 1999 ECA conducted two comprehensive surveys of national statistical services which provided a review of problems, activities and developments in the region.

14. Consultation of users is a standard practice at the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Statistics Division. Questionnaires on the degree of satisfaction of the users are regularly distributed at the end of the plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES), and of the other meetings in the CES work programme.

15. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) conducted a user survey for the *Social Panorama of Latin America*, a publication which is prepared jointly by the Economic Projections and Statistical Division and the Social Division of ECLAC. It contained questions on the usefulness of the analysis and the information, on its quality and on the need to include other topics. The report on the survey findings, which were very positive for the *Panorama*, was prepared in 1998. Other indicators for 1999 stem from the records obtained from visitors to the ECLAC web site. Statistical products posted are among the most consulted, particularly those on short-term databases and reports.

16. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has been conducting user surveys on sales statistical publications, but the response rates to these user surveys have been low. The respondents are concentrated among the government users and those who receive ESCAP publications on a complimentary basis.

17. In the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), two bulletins — *National Accounts*, No. 18 and *Vital Statistics in ESCWA Member States*, No. 2, and a database on gender statistics were evaluated by outside experts and focal points in member States. ESCWA also distributed questionnaires among participants to four workshops on industrial and construction statistics; vital statistics and civil registration systems in ESCWA member States; gender statistics in the Arab countries; and national accounts.

D. Regional information systems

Recommendation 4
Improvement in regional information systems

The Information Technology Services Division, Department of Administration and Management, should assist the Statistics Division and the regional commissions in the development

of compatible standards for information technology systems.

18. The United Nations Statistics Division is actively promoting the UNESIS platform for all regional statistics divisions and provides assistance in organizing training for programmers and database administrators associated with developing and maintaining statistical information systems. The Information Technology Services Division provides assistance to the Division in establishing standards for hardware and procurement as well as in promoting new technologies. Consultations have been undertaken through missions to ECE, ECLAC and ESCWA, and by letter and through personal contacts with ECA and ESCAP. The methodology of UNESIS will be fully documented and released for further consultations in the first quarter of 2000.

III. Publications

A. Policy

Recommendation 5
Statistical publications policy

Statistical publications of the United Nations should consist of:

(a) Publications that are issued as sales publications as a matter of record or for other non-commercial reasons in appropriate small print runs. The same information can be issued additionally in mimeograph or similar inexpensive print or machine-readable forms. There should be no embargo on free distribution of the same information on-line;

(b) Publications that are of commercial significance, and which are financed, produced, advertised and sold so as to maximize sales revenue, with on-line information made available in a manner that protects the United Nations commercial interest in those publications.

Sales publications with a market demand that is not commercially viable and for which the United Nations does not have a strong non-commercial interest in continued publication should be discontinued. The information in them should be made available on-line or in machine-readable products.

19. The United Nations Statistics Division currently distributes various methodological publications, newsletters, technical information and metadata related documents in electronic format freely downloadable from the Division's Internet web site. All publications are provided at no cost to member States and small print runs are available for a fee to private persons or organizations. Technical information of no commercial value is routinely distributed from limited print runs and on the Internet.

20. Efforts are made to identify the commercial interests of the organization as indicated in paragraph 4 above. Division publications of commercial significance are promoted via the Internet, newsletters, United Nations publications catalogues and other promotional activities.

21. In June 1998, the United Nations publications programme and publishing policies were examined by the Committee for Programme and Coordination in the context of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit contained in document A/51/946 and the Secretary-General's comments thereupon (A/52/685). The discussion and conclusions and recommendations[3] make clear that despite the advances being made in electronic publishing by the Secretariat, the continuance of printed publications remained important for delegations.

22. The Publication Board's Working Group on Electronic Publishing, chaired by the Chief of the Statistical Services Branch, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and composed of representatives from all Headquarters departments, has developed guidelines to coordinate the Secretariat's Internet services. General policy issues as well as technical elements of presentation are covered. The guidelines are designed to assist departments and offices within the Secretariat to develop their web pages and standardize design, style and content.

B. Evaluation

Recommendation 6
Evaluation of publications

All United Nations statistical publications should be subject to reviews similar to those described in paragraph 70 [of the in-depth evaluation (E/AC.51/1997/2)].

23. For the implementation of recommendation 6, see paragraphs 6-17 above.

IV. Coordination of programme and services

A. Integrated presentation

Recommendation 7
Integrated presentation

The Statistics Division, in cooperation with the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, should prepare an experimental integrated presentation in order to identify opportunities for joint activities and collaboration in areas of common concern. A report on this experiment should be submitted to the next meeting of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination of the Statistical Commission.

24. A pilot version of integrated presentation contains the following features:

(a) It will be a first step in the direction of an integrated presentation of methodological work;

(b) It will include previously produced methodological publications;

(c) It will include linkages to home pages of city groups;

(d) Actual texts of classifications will be incorporated.

A report on the integrated presentation was submitted to the Statistical Commission at its thirty-first session (E/CN.3/2000/20).

25. The Conference of European Statisticians has developed since the early 1990s an integrated presentation of the statistical work programmes of the major international organizations active in the field of statistics in the ECE region. The integrated presentation covers all fields of statistical activities, suitably classified in six main headings, and includes the activities of the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations Statistics Division, the International Monetary Fund, the Commonwealth of Independent States and other major international organizations. The updating follows an annual cycle, while there is an in-depth review of the various programme elements every two years. The integrated presentation is a tool for information and coordination; it permits the identification and analysis of gaps and overlaps. The integrated presentation of the United Nations Statistics Division is coordinated with ECE.

B. Analytical services

Recommendation 8
Analytical services to Departments

In environmental statistics, the Statistics Division has already established a joint task force with the Division for Sustainable Development for the development of policy-oriented indicators. Similar arrangements should be established with other units of the Secretariat and the specialized agencies with reporting responsibilities for the refinement and compilation of internationally comparable socio-economic indicators.

26. The United Nations Statistics Division continues to cooperate with other divisions in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and other organizations to enhance existing joint task forces both within and outside the United Nations system.

27. The report of the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities submitted to the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session (see E/CN.3/1999/22, para. 2 (a)) lists a number of activities of the type envisioned in the recommendation, relating to:

- The development of an inventory of indicators produced by the United Nations system;
- The completion of a development indicators web site;
- The rationalization and harmonization of indicators for the common country assessment, and the continuation of the core indicators programme;
- Harmonization and rationalization in the area of environmental indicators.

28. A detailed report providing a critical review of the development of indicators in the context of

conference follow-up (previously reviewed by an expert group meeting on development indicators and the Statistical Commission) was submitted to the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1999 (E/1999/11). The United Nations Statistics Division was the lead division for this project. The report provided descriptions of indicator programmes at the international level related to recent United Nations conferences, an assessment of gaps and inconsistencies in this data and descriptions of the situation at the country level. It also provided a discussion of means of implementation and set out a number of possible next steps.

C. Dissemination of innovations

Recommendation 9
Dissemination of innovations and lessons learned

The experiences of the regional commissions, such as those described in paragraphs 59 and 60 [of the in-depth evaluation (E/AC.51/1997/2)], should be systematically reviewed for possible wider adoption. The regional commissions should establish regular joint symposiums on their experiences.

29. The paragraphs referred to in recommendation 9 of the in-depth evaluation noted the work of ECLAC in producing the 1995 *Social Panorama of Latin America*, its development of short-term economic indicators and poverty estimates and the consolidation of statistical services in ECE. Descriptions of continuing work on these and other innovations in the statistical programmes of the regional commissions are to be found on the web sites of each commission.

30. The United Nations Statistics Division is providing methodological assistance in developing statistical information systems for offices away from Headquarters and in the organization of training for staff involved in the development of statistical systems. Representatives of the Division are active participants of regional-level meetings and workshops.

D. Review

Recommendation 10
Review by Statistical Commission

The present report, and the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination on it, should be submitted to the next meeting of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination of the Statistical Commission.

31. The in-depth evaluation (E/AC.51/1997/2) was presented to the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination in February 1998. The Working Group approved the implementation plan and timetable proposed by the United Nations Statistics Division for realizing the recommendations of the in-depth review of the statistics programme, and at its thirtieth session, the Statistical Commission took note of the plan and timetable.[4]

V. Utilization of staff resources

32. In the 1994-1995 biennium, the distribution of the programme's activities and resources, measured by the proportion of Professional staff time, was heavily concentrated on the production of recurrent publications, which accounted for more than 50 per cent of the total professional effort other than technical assistance. In reality, the proportion of resources allocated to publications was significantly higher since most of the General Service staff (66 of the 135 staff) were largely engaged in the processing of the statistical data used in the production of recurrent publications. The in-depth evaluation proposed that a strategy is needed to make a shift in allocations, over the four-year period of the medium-term plan, to a focus on services determined by user needs and a knowledge of utilization patterns.

33. A comparison of utilization patterns in 1998-1999 with those of 1994-1995 indicates that the strategic shift in the allocation of staff time proposed in the in-depth evaluation is taking place.

Actual utilization of Professional work/months in the United Nations Statistics Division, 1994-1995 and 1998-1999

Major categories of outputs and services	*Baseline: 1994-1995 (E/AC.51/1997/2, table 4)*		*1998-1999 (preliminary estimate)*	
	Professional work/months (RB + XB)	*Percentage*	*Professional work/months (RB + XB)*	*Percentage*
Methodological activity	289	24.8	316	26.3
Parliamentary services	97	8.3	100	8.3
Data processing	176	15.1	278	23.1
Customized services to users	-[a]	-[a]	-[a]	-[a]
Publications	605	51.8	508	42.3
Total	**1 167**	**100.0**	**1 202**	**100.0**
Memorandum item				
Technical cooperation				
Regular budget (RB)	244	59.0	96	44.4
Extrabudgetary (XB)	169	41.0	120	55.5
Total	**413**	**100.0**	**216**	**100.0**

[a] Not identified separately.

VI. Conclusions

34. The implementation plan and schedule presented to the Working Group of the Statistical Commission and subsequently to the Commission itself by the United Nations Statistics Division, and the actions taken, represent a concerted effort to implement the recommendations of the in-depth evaluation as endorsed by CPC.

(*Signed*) Hans **Corell**
Under-Secretary-General
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Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/49/16, part I), para. 34.

[2] Ibid., *Fifty-second Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/52/16, part I), paras. 292-294.

[3] Ibid., *Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/53/16, part I), paras. 334-352.

[4] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 4* (E/1999/24), paras. 139-142.